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Narrating Arcosanti: A Utopian Project Considered Through its Representations

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Narrating Arcosanti: A Utopian Project Considered Through its Representations

Senior Project submitted to
The Division of Multidisciplinary Studies
of Bard College

by
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Annandale-on-Hudson, NY

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Introduction

The unpaved road leading to Arcosanti off of US Interstate 17 traces a wide arc around the site, spiraling inwards as it gets closer to the small cluster of buildings standing at the center of a wide dusty plain, surrounded on all sides by distant mountain ranges. The compound seems to turn like the figure on top of a music box, as if rewarding its visitor for making the trip out to this remote spot in the high desert of central Arizona. At each turn Arcosanti imparts on the viewer a different impression; from the south, the profile is that of an Italian hilltop village, perched on the edge of a mesa. Getting closer, the site looks more like an archaeological dig, as if the wreckage of an old ship is being carved out from the basalt cliff. Around the last bend, approaching from the north and now quite close, the whole place looks like a dump, with piles of discarded construction materials and old cars lining the backs of low concrete buildings. Arcosanti is a small community of about fifty permanent residents located an hour's drive north of Phoenix. It was established in 1970 as a site of architectural and societal experimentation, reconfiguring the way that cities are constructed and that humans interact with their surroundings.

Arcosanti is a project of the Cosanti Foundation, which was started in 1965 by the Italian architect and philosopher Paolo Soleri.¹ Soleri was born in 1919, in Turin, Italy, and was awarded his Doctorate in architecture from the Turin Polytechnic University in 1946.² After completing his education, Soleri applied and was accepted to study in the United States under architect Frank Lloyd Wright, and it was this chance to work under the famous American architect that first brought Soleri to Arizona. Soleri apprenticed under Wright at Taliesin West, for a year and a half starting in 1947, but left Wright to begin his own independent architectural

¹ Cosanti Foundation, "Cosanti Foundation", arcosanti.org

² Cosanti Foundation, *Biography*

career. Soleri chose to stay in Arizona where the raw beauty of the landscape proved inspirational for him, and began designing buildings that fit into the rocky outcroppings of the Arizona desert.³ It was from this body of work that he received his first architectural commission, the “Dome House” (Figure 1), which he designed and built with his friend Mark Mills.⁴ Soleri married, and returned to Italy for a few years, where he oversaw the construction of a ceramics factory in Vietri-sul-Mare, before ultimately returning to Arizona in 1956.



Figure 1: Living room of the Dome House, by Paolo Soleri and Mark Mills.⁵

³ The series of houses was called the “arizonians”. His designs showed small, sparse houses perched on cliff sides and nestled in the deserts of Arizona.

⁴ “Design Commissions”, arcosanti.org

⁵ Photograph by Julius Shulman, 1985. via archdaily.com

These early architectural projects were praised for their form and materiality. But Soleri was ultimately more interested in questions of scale, setting his sights not on designing individual buildings, but entire urban networks. Specifically, Soleri was curious about how consumer culture and the automobile shaped cities in the United States.⁶ Soleri started the Cosanti Foundation to explore alternate means of designing and building cities. Even the name Cosanti speaks to this mission of research; a portmanteau of two Italian words – *cosa*, “a thing”, and *anti*, “before” or “against” – Cosanti means something like before (or against) material things.

Cosanti was the site of Soleri’s home and architectural studio, and in the decade after he purchased the four-acre plot of land in the far suburbs of Phoenix, he hosted a series of architectural workshops and constructed a number of buildings on site. Then in 1969 the foundation purchased a large tract of land to the north, intended to be the site of an architectural project larger than any that it had undertaken before. Soleri planned to build a new city, which was to serve as a model of his theories of urban planning. Soleri named this city Arcosanti, and it was to be his *magnum opus*.

The project emerged out of a body of work that Soleri produced around what he called *Arcology* theory. Yet another portmanteau of Soleri’s, Arcology brings together the words architecture and ecology, and was used to describe an ultra compact city functioning in harmony with nature. Arcosanti was to be the world’s first Arcology. Ground broke in 1970, and the construction process, led by Soleri himself, was carried out through a workshop-style program, wherein young architects from local universities and other architectural and environmental enthusiasts came to learn about Soleri’s theories and take part in the design and construction of

⁶ Paolo Soleri. *Arcosanti: an urban laboratory?* Cosanti Press, 1993

the new city. In relatively small numbers, and without a master plan from which to work, this proved to be a slow method of construction, especially in the sight of the massive size of the envisioned final product. But, under a committed group of like-minded professionals, and with a steady flow of students and volunteers, construction has been more or less continuous since the 1970s, and it is still in progress to this day

I learned about Arcosanti through the Environmental and Urban Studies program at Bard College. Another student had gone there a few years earlier and reported back her excitement over the project. I did some research and, like many before me, found that something interesting was going on in the desert of Arizona, and decided to get involved. I volunteered at Arcosanti in the summer of 2016, to take part in the Experiential Learning workshop, the very same program that over the decades has built the site into what it is now.

During the first week on site, I was introduced to Paolo Soleri's philosophical and urban planning theories and learned about the history of the project as well. I attended a series of lectures given by some of the more senior members of the Arcosanti community— those who head the many departments or who have been involved the longest. It was fascinating to learn about the project from people who had been involved for so long, and who had personally known Paolo Soleri.

For the remainder of my stay, I joined the construction department, taking part in the myriad tasks that keep Arcosanti functioning and the plan progressing; we built a rock wall, poured concrete, salvaged timber from an unused structure, sorted recycling, maintained the compost system, and worked on a few landscaping projects. The majority of my time with the construction team was dedicated to the design and installation of a grey-water irrigation system, which was the main construction undertaking on site at the time.

What was undoubtedly the most engrossing aspect of the workshop for me, however, was the free time, after the day's work was over, to explore the property and talk with the residents. I spent hours wandering around the buildings and grounds, as if exploring a maze, and listening to the stories of some of the many interesting men and women who make up the Arcosanti community. This time to explore and to talk with people, as a supplement to the information I received through the lectures, allowed me to piece together a more complete picture of the project. Each new perspective that these individuals shared with me provided a more rounded-out account of the Arcosanti story. Furthermore, my own exploration of Arcosanti provided for a more experiential understanding of the project that I couldn't have gotten without actually immersing myself in the place and the work. Thinking back to my time at Arcosanti, it was these moments of interaction, with the site and with its inhabitants, to which I find myself returning again and again.

Looking at Arcosanti's history, and wondering about its future, I found myself asking what it means to be part of an ongoing project. One of the reasons that Arcosanti is so interesting is precisely because it is a work in progress. The site is home to some fifty people throughout the year who are constantly building upon the work of previous inhabitants. Even after Soleri's passing in 2013, Arcosanti has remained an extremely active place. Soleri's initial wish to reexamine the urban environment has become a living experiment.

I also found myself wondering how the project has changed as it continues to take form. What is the relationship between Soleri's original envisioning of the project and the outcomes of the last five decades of work? How have the concepts that inspired Soleri and the individuals that helped him over the years been embodied in the physical site, as well as in its representations? Soleri was a prolific writer and visual artist, so it is interesting to consider how themes from his

writings and artworks have directly influenced the project's history. It is also important to reflect on questions of authorship. After all, Soleri could not have built Arcosanti without the help of a great number of men and women. Who are the figures that have shaped the project, and that continue to shape and interpret the site? In a way, each individual that interacts with Arcosanti produces new experiential information about the site. How do these different authors come in dialogue with each other, and how should each narrative be weighed against the Cosanti Foundation and Soleri's vision?

Finally, a subject that has been on my mind is the question of whether or not Arcosanti should be considered a utopian project. Paolo Soleri has stated that he did not view his work as utopian, and to this day the Cosanti Foundation insists that building a utopia is not the aim of the project.⁷ Yet, throughout Arcosanti's history, many who have come to see and taken part in the project have called it utopian. Reflecting back on my time on site, I too couldn't help but wonder if Arcosanti were in fact a sort of utopia: an honest day of hard work followed by an evening of interesting conversation, all in a unique architectural site set within a beautiful landscape. What does it mean to think of the Arcosanti as a utopian space, and how does this fit into the questions of authorship, perception, and the unfinished and ongoing nature of the Arcosanti project?

Background – Arcology

Rather than merely changing the form of the individual buildings within a city, a cosmetic approach to better living, Soleri dreamt of redefining the way entire cities were constructed. Soleri conceptually approached the city as an organism, connecting the design

⁷ Paolo Soleri. *What If? Collected Writings 1986 – 2000*, Berkeley Hills Books, 2002

principles of the Arcology to the structuring of the human body.⁸ Through this ecological lens, the city is alive, it requires an influx of natural resources while producing waste. The task of reordering the city is thus linked to the process of evolution. According to Arcology theory, the current model of city growth is not viable; the city cannot continue to grow uncontrollably and without any consideration for the finite resources on which it is dependent.

In response, the Arcology is a highly complex and extremely compact city, bounded within a small footprint and therefore demanding maximum efficiency. Soleri imagined Arcologies as mega-structures, an entire city housed in one huge building, rather like large skyscrapers.⁹ In fact it was because of the same conditions that historically gave rise to the skyscraper—high land costs at the centers of cities that necessitated building up rather than out—that lead Soleri to develop the Arcology theory. The total amount of land on planet Earth is finite, and in the face of a rapidly growing human population, all open space, let alone arable or resource-rich land, becomes extremely valuable. Therefore, the Arcology theory puts forward that cities cannot afford to expand outward, with the construction of low-density suburbs, but must grow upwards.

⁸ Paolo Soleri, *Arcology: The City in the Image of Man*. Bridgewood Press, Phoenix, AZ. 1969

⁹ Soleri, *City in the Image of Man*



Figure 2: Paolo Soleri, seated in front of “3D Jersey”, a model displayed in in the 1970 Corcoran exhibit of his work.⁵

The Arcology, then, is the plane of the modern city folded in on itself, a complex and compact three-dimensional space. Reorganizing the city in turn restructures the relationship between humans and the environment, and creates new modes of social organization. Because Arcosanti is to be the first Arcology, the project will always be compared against the vision of the completed Arcology communicated through Soleri’s works. Building Arcosanti is immensely important as an opportunity to investigate Soleri’s theories. Yet Arcosanti also takes on the burden of proof in that the project must effectively demonstrate, and actually sell, the virtues of Soleri’s theories to a skeptical and otherwise content society, under the mounting pressure of global climate change and population growth.

That Paolo Soleri sought to address societal issues through architecture in the Arcosanti project places the work done there in dialogue with a long history of utopian counter-cultural

¹⁰ Photograph by Ivan Pintar, 1970, via arcosanti.org

social and architectural movements. The Twentieth Century witnessed the formation of an incredible number of revolutionary and idealist groups across the world. The Kibbutzim of Israel that arose at the turn of the century, and continue to function to this day, are a classic example of an alternative group lifestyle.¹¹ The anarchist *Colectividades* that formed in Spain after the 1936 Spanish Civil War provide a glimpse at how the reshaping of communities can become part of an important political movement.¹² Later, the anti-capitalist farming communes of Japan in the 1960s drew citizens out of Japan's major urban areas into rural communities, rejecting trends of urbanization and industrialization.¹³ Thus, throughout the twentieth century, the appearance of counter-cultural groups that sought to reshape the societies from which they emerged became a trend across the globe.

In the United States towards the end of the twentieth century, heightening waves of protests connected to the war in Vietnam, the Civil Rights movement, and various student movements motivated a generation of young, middle class Americans to rebel against society.¹⁴ An investigation into the relationship between spatial and societal relations was at the heart of many of the counter-cultural groups that arose in the 1960s and 1970s.¹⁵ It was during this period, which has been described as the height of the counter-cultural utopian era in the United States, that ground broke at Arcosanti in 1970.

¹¹ Oved, Yaacov. "Communal Movements in the Twentieth Century", in *Utopia: The Search for the Ideal Society in the Western World*. New York: Oxford Press, 2000.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Oved, "Communal Movements in the Twentieth Century"; and Roland Schaer, "Utopia: Space, Time, History", in *Utopia: The search for the Ideal Society in the Western World*

¹⁵ Oved. "Communal Movements"

The infamous Drop City, connected to architect Buckminster Fuller,¹⁶ is an important example of an alternative community in the United States that forged a new social system and, most importantly, an accompanying architectural legacy.¹⁷ Drop City was hailed as the first counter-cultural “hippie” community. Following Buckminster Fuller’s lead, the residents of Drop City used the geodesic dome as a utopian symbol of equality – the domes were easy to construct, uniform in design, though malleable to suit different purposes.¹⁸ The shape of the dome is also a shape of simplicity and unity, at once ancient and symbol of the future. The architecture of Drop City placed it at the forefront of technological innovation, though also estranged it from the normative 1960s United States, as did the group’s social structuring.

The project at Drop City proved to be short-lived. One of the marking traits of alternative social groups built upon utopian idealization and projection is their somewhat ironically short-lived periods of activity. Disagreements and disillusionments that affect small communities, often as a result of the death or departure of some central charismatic figure, lead to their eventual disintegration. It’s a rather dark vision of utopian political groups– the loftier the goals it seems the less grounded in reality the group becomes. While Drop City was an experiment on the fringe of society, the project remains an inspiring instance of a small-scale project with large utopian themes at its core. It is therefore fascinating that a group like Arcosanti, at its inception no larger than Fuller’s Drop City and with goals just as lofty, has not crumbled apart under time, but proves to be alive and functioning even to this day.

This paper will look closely at work that is connected to Arcosanti. A good portion of literature related to the project was produced by Soleri and the Cosanti Foundation. Soleri wrote

¹⁶ Buckminster Fuller and Paolo Soleri were acquaintances. Fuller came to visit Soleri’s home at Cosanti in the 1960s, as recounted in Kathleen Vanesian’s 2013 article in the *Phoenix New Times*, “Paolo Soleri is the True Legend of the Arizona Architecture Scene”.

¹⁷ Simon Sadler, “Drop City Revisited”, *Journal of Architectural Education*, vol. 58, no. 1, 2006

¹⁸ Sadler, “Drop City Revisited”

extensively on the subject of ecological city design, and produced an abundance of drawings and sculptures that explore these topics. Imagery also plays an important role in Arcosanti's representation, and Soleri left behind a number of illustrations dedicated to Arcology and Arcosanti. Throughout the history of the project, there has been an effort to use written and visual representations of Arcosanti to document the project in a more experiential way. Articles written in newspapers and magazines, for example, provide intimate and exciting glimpses into the project. There is also a wealth of photography and video imagery of Arcosanti, made accessible via the Internet, which allows one to see what the project looks like even without visiting – an interesting aspect of “experiencing” Arcosanti in the digital age.

The first chapter will investigate the history of Arcosanti's construction and the community that developed there. The role that educational workshops play in building the community will be explored, as well as the corporate aspect of the project. This chapter will also look at the site as it stands today.

The second chapter will consider the role of text in the formation of the Arcosanti project, specifically looking at Paolo Soleri as an author. This chapter will analyze how Soleri used text to articulate his architectural and philosophical theories, and how text as a medium has shaped the Arcosanti project.

The third chapter will dive into Soleri's visual representations of Arcology, as a means of placing Arcosanti today in dialogue with Soleri's vision. Soleri produced an abundance of architectural imagery that to this day forms an important part of the project's identity.¹⁹ This chapter will consider how visual imagery communicates utopian concepts, looking at the various

¹⁹ The large scale drawings, and later the models, that he created brought national attention to Arcosanti. The 1970 exhibition “The Visions of Paolo Soleri” at Washington D.C.'s Corcoran Gallery attracted a record-breaking number of attendees, and then traveled extensively throughout the United States and Canada. The 2005 exhibition in Rome brought similar international attention.

styles of illustration that Soleri employed to map out his ideas, and closely analyzing some of his works. Finally, the chapter will look at the relationship between what is shown and what is absent in these images.

The conclusion will then move away from Soleri's work to consider Arcosanti as it appears in the public imagination, and reflect on issues of authorship, the difficulties of representation, and the value of experiential knowledge as it relates to the project.



Figure 3: The Arcosanti amphitheater (author's photograph)

Chapter One: Construction and Community

When Sir Thomas More published in 1516 his book *Utopia*, in which a traveler recounts his trip to a utopian community, the text was accompanied by a wood block print depicting the utopian isle.²⁰ Since then, there has been a wealth of utopian projects captured through both the written word and visual depictions. Only a few of these projects have been able to encircle others into their visions, and far fewer are enacted upon, leaving the page behind to become concrete realities. Without a doubt, over the many years that Paolo Soleri dedicated to his Arcology concept, the written and visual works that he produced opened up a world of imagination, of incredible ecological, architectural, and social possibilities. Through text and illustration, Soleri's visions found room to grow and expand, and was able to draw attention from others, folding the public into these projections. But this was only the beginning of the Arcosanti story. After all, Soleri planned Arcosanti to be a living experiment, a prototype of his Arcology theory that could actually be built. Arcosanti was to be Soleri's "urban laboratory", and while it has never become the compact city of the future that he originally set out to build, it is still very much a project in progress. Construction has been continuous for the last fifty years, a slow but steady process of realizing the Arcology. Importantly, Arcosanti is not a self-realizing entity but rather a place built and inhabited by real people. Throughout this half-century, thousands of individuals have dedicated their time and skills to building the project, and hundreds of thousands more have visited.²¹ After being touched by so many hands, Arcosanti takes on a mind of its own, something intricately connected to and yet separate from its representations. In some way Arcosanti is the product of all those that have interacted with it.

²⁰ More, Thomas. *Utopia*. trans. Clarence Miller. Yale University Press, 2001.

²¹ "Welcome", arcosanti.org

This chapter will look at the Arcosanti manifested outside of Soleri's texts. Arcosanti as a physical entity bares witness to itself. The story of the people who have worked there and the philosophy that drew them are at some level contained within the project's construction. Not only is the physical site as it stands today the product of many individuals, but Arcosanti, as a concept, as well as how it is perceived and interpreted by its interlocutors, has been shaped by many voices. Narratives connected to Arcosanti come from varying points of familiarity, and even proximity, to the project, such that there are now many written and visual representations of Arcosanti that contribute to its image in the popular imagination.

History, Construction, Education, Community

The relationship between construction and community is at the heart of the Arcosanti story, because it was the assemblage of materials and people in that remote site which drove the production and shaping of space at Arcosanti. The model of a community built around construction fits nicely with Soleri's Arcology concept. Community-building through architecture, and the close cooperation of people through physical labor, has been a thread that runs through all of Soleri's work. This can be traced back to Soleri's first years in the United States, working with Frank Lloyd Wright at Taliesin West.

Wright established Taliesin West as an architectural studio and school just outside of Phoenix.²² Young architects would come to Taliesin to apprentice under Wright, and it was this vision of architecture, education, and collaboration that brought Soleri to the United States. While at Taliesin West, Soleri studied Wright's Broadacre City, a proposal for a complete reordering of urban fabric, a turning away from architectural norms as a means of realizing

²² Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation, "Taliesin West" <http://franklloydwright.org/taliesin-west/>

modernity.²³ Looking at the overcrowding of the industrial cityscape, Wright urged for a redistributing of resources and a reorganizing of urban space. Broadacre City envisioned a spreading out of inhabitants across the land, the city as a garden.²⁴ Broadacre City comes as part of a period of utopian city planning responding to the industrial confusion of the 19th century city, and coinciding with the rise of the suburbs. The Garden City movement, sparked by Ebenezer Howard's 1902 *Garden Cities of To-morrow*, sought to bring the city back into harmony with nature, in this way granting its inhabitants access to both the pleasures of the country and the opportunities of the city.²⁵ Howard's Garden City was designed as a series of concentric rings, alternating between built environment and greenbelts, emanating outwards in a large and low-density space. Wright's Broadacre City pushed the garden city concept to its extreme, doing away with the concentric rings that organized and separated the built and natural environments in Howard's vision. Instead, Wright completely dispersed architecture among the natural in his plan, such that every household had its own sizable plot.

Wright's plan was, on the surface, an appealing response to the industrial confusion of the 19th century city. And yet, it was the ideals represented in this project that drove Soleri away from Wright.²⁶ The philosophy behind Broadacre City was problematic for Soleri because the overall vision was one of suburban luxuries; it depended upon an ever-expanding, ever-consuming capitalism; it prioritized the individual's comfort over the functioning of the community; its spread dominated the wild and domesticated nature. Soleri opposed the egocentricity of the American Dream that was realized in this dismantling of the city, a vision of expansion as a kind of manifest destiny.

²³ Frank Lloyd Wright, "The Disappearing City", 1932. In *The Essential Frank Lloyd Wright*, ed. Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer. Princeton university Press, 2008

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Howard, Ebenezer. *Garden Cities of To-morrow*, Ed. F.J. Osborn. M.I.T. Press, Cambridge, 1965

²⁶ Paolo Soleri, *Conversations with Paolo Soleri*. ed. La McCullough. Princeton Architectural Press, 2012.

Not only was Soleri unsatisfied with Wright's vision for a new American utopia, but he was also disappointed with his time at Taliesin in general. Rather than working with Wright on architectural designs, Soleri reported that he and the other apprentices were more like waiters for the Wrights, preparing meals and arranging flowers in the house.²⁷ These combined dissatisfactions, with Wright's philosophy and with the realities of the apprenticeship, led Soleri to leave Taliesin. It was at this point that Soleri decided to form his own architectural studio, Cosanti.

The format of architectural apprenticeship, of community gathered around construction, that Soleri found lacking at Taliesin, stayed with him. Soleri started teaching construction courses, sponsored by the Arizona State University School of Architecture, at Cosanti.²⁸ These courses attracted students who were interested in gaining hands-on experience in architectural planning and construction. And indeed for many years Soleri's 4½-acre plot of land in Paradise Valley was abuzz, an active and experimental construction site in the suburbs of phoenix. Along with his students and interns, Soleri built up Cosanti into a compound of concrete buildings, semi-subterranean and spaces composed of arches and vaults. The first structure completed at Cosanti was the "Earth House" in 1956, which would serve as the primary residence of Soleri and his new family (Figure 4). Earth House is a structure made up of reinforced concrete, poured onto a mound of earth which was then excavated from underneath the concrete roof.²⁹ The final structure is a unique, cave-like space that is cool in the desert heat and yet light and spacious. The architecture of the Earth House, and the rest of the structures at Cosanti, stands in stark contrast with the rambling mansions of the surrounding suburbs that would eventually grow around it.

²⁷ "Soleri thinks very big" in *New York Times*, July 26, 1970.

²⁸ *ibid.*

²⁹ Michael Gotkin, *Artists' Handmade Houses*, Abrams Press, New York, 2011



Figure 4: Photograph of Paolo Soleri standing in front of the complete Earth House at Cosanti, from LIFE magazine, February 1959.³⁰

The construction techniques employed at Cosanti, and later at Arcosanti, were inspired by Soleri's time working on the Solimene ceramics factory in Vietri-sul-Mare. Soleri learned to make ceramic bells by pouring liquid clay into molds of tightly compacted silt, which leaves a hardened shell with an earthy texture to it. Soleri modified this process of "earth-casting", using cement instead of clay, to produce large prefabricated segments, which could then be fitted together to create buildings. Each piece could either be poured directly in place, or cast nearby and lifted into place, forming the large arches and apses that make up the majority of structures

³⁰ Leonard McCombe, photographer, LIFE Magazine, February 1959, via Getty Images

on site. Conceptually, then, the structures of Cosanti and Arcosanti are nothing more than large ceramics pieces, each one a work of art as much as a work of construction.

The architecture and construction classes that brought students to Cosanti became gradually larger. The workshops hosted at Cosanti brought artists and architects who directly took part in the construction of the site, as well as producing sculptural works and wind bells. In 1961, the site and all of these activities were incorporated under the name The Cosanti Foundation. This allowed Soleri to run his studio as a nonprofit educational, conservational, and urban planning organization, meaning that he could continue construction, produce bells, and hire apprentices without paying taxes.³¹



Figure 5: Paolo Soleri surrounded by students, in the Ceramics Apse of Arcosanti, mid 1970s.³²

³¹ “Soleri thinks very big” in *New York Times*, July 26, 1970.

³² Photograph by Ivan Pintar, via Arcosanti Catalyst

The work at Cosanti continued in this manner throughout the 1960s, with the size of its workshop programs and architectural apprenticeship system gradually expanding, until a sizable dedicated community had developed around Soleri and his work. It was coming out of this period of expansion that the Cosanti Foundation set its sights on its next big project, the construction of Arcosanti. The construction workshops were transferred from Cosanti to the new site, and Soleri and his apprentices began preparing for construction, amassing supplies and detonating the basalt mesa top to make room for their new structures.

Arcosanti slowly came into being, realized just as Cosanti had been before it through the work of thousands of student volunteers. Therefore, construction as an educational process played a critical role in bringing people together and actually producing the physical site. Over the course of its lifetime, the Cosanti Foundation has relied on educational institutions as a means of ensuring a constant supply of motivated and innovative thinkers. Arcosanti continues to run workshops, which help to push construction to this day. The Foundation has recently entered into a partnership with Strathclyde University in Glasgow, Scotland, which will open up new possibilities for workshop focuses, and potentially change the way in which the project develops.³³ It was through the network of educational institutions that I found Arcosanti in the first place.

The 1970s were the most active period of construction at Arcosanti, when the majority of the buildings on site were constructed, and at the peak there were over two hundred people living on site.³⁴ Today, things have slowed down; larger construction projects are fewer and farther between, and the community hovers around only fifty year-round residents. Some of the original

³³ The Cosanti Foundation, "Institutional Collaboration", [arcosanti.org <https://arcosanti.org/node/14101>](https://arcosanti.org/node/14101)

³⁴ Author's conversation with Roger Tomalty.

residents still live on site, now in their sixties and seventies. But the community continues to attract younger residents, students and artists mostly in their thirties, as it had been in the early days.

At Arcosanti, residents are often referred to as “Arconauts”. The term “Arconaut” has a few meanings folded within it. On one hand, it references the Ancient Greek story of Jason and the Argonauts, the Argonauts being a group of sailors who set out with Jason to find the mythical Golden Fleece. In this sense, the residents of Arcosanti are like the workers of the ship, joining Soleri in the search for a mythical and utopian urbanity. In a more contemporary reference, the term “Arconaut” could be playing with the figure of the astronaut, or Soviet cosmonaut, figures in the space race-era quest for modernity. In both instances, Arcosanti becomes the vessel aboard which these brave individuals hurdle through space and time.

All residents are employees of the Cosanti foundation, and must complete the five-week workshop program before they can petition to live at Arcosanti. The work at Arcosanti is divided among departments focused on the continued construction and maintenance of the site, archiving Soleri’s works, and educating and interacting with the public. Like many intentional communities funded through the sale of crafts, the Arcosanti community is largely supported by the marketing of ceramic and bronze wind-bells.³⁵ Many of the Arcosanti residents are directly involved in the production and sale of these bells, which brings in the majority of the Cosanti Foundation’s revenue. Over the years, Soleri and the artisans of Arcosanti also completed a number of large sculptural installations, which were sold to a few sites around the greater Phoenix, for example a museum, a library, and a shopping mall. While bringing attention, and much-needed revenue to Soleri and his work, these transactions highlight an important tension between the aspirations of the Cosanti Foundation and the means through which they must

³⁵ “Soleri thinks very big” in *New York Times*, July 26, 1970.

interact with the public. There is a rejection of consumerism underlying life at Arcosanti community, and with it a perceived distancing of residents from the outside. And yet, to interact with the surrounding communities, and indeed the rest of the outside world, Arcosanti must operate in similar capitalistic modes, commodifying not only the work produced on site, but the Arcosanti way of life as well.

Almost everyone involved in the Arcosanti project lives on site, with the only exception being those members of the project that are also involved in the work at Cosanti, an hour south. Although the site is small, it is mazelike and dense. Pathways twist their way around the site, and community spaces break off into warren-like networks of private rooms, or rooms that have fallen into disuse. To house all of the residents, there are apartments in every single structure. These spaces range from single rooms, nestled into basements, off of staircases, on top of archways, to larger apartment suites and family spaces. Each building contains ample artistic and structural detail, and Soleri's murals are to be found on walls and floors and ceilings. Old ceramic and bronze bells hang in every tree and doorway, such that on a windy day their gentle sounds can always be heard.

Over the years, a few families have even taken root at Arcosanti, with the arrival of children on the site marking an important point of transition for the project. Families with young children are stabilizing for Arcosanti, in that families tend to be more rooted than individuals. The nuclear family is also a normalizing factor for Arcosanti, bringing a more traditional image of community structuring to the experimental construction site. Furthermore, those children born and raised on site are the first generation of true Arconauts. In the decades to come it will be interesting to see how these individuals view the Arcosanti project, which they have called home, and how they interact with the other individuals drawn to the site.

That Arcosanti is run by the Cosanti foundation makes the community into a kind of company housing project, although in actuality the space resembles anything but that. Each apartment is unique, and residents shift around relatively frequently, meaning that even after years of living at Arcosanti, residents can continue to find new ways of inhabiting the site. Whether Soleri originally intended for the Arcology to be controlled by a single organization, with membership in the community being based on belonging or not belong to that entity, this is the framework that has develop at Arcosanti. The vision of Utopia then becomes work-oriented, centered on production— of bells and of buildings. And yet, rather than feeling bureaucratic, there's a sort of surreal summer camp feeling on site. There is the daily community-wide Morning Meeting, where residents discuss the day's activities. For the most part, everyone eats meals together and organizes outings to local activities, karaoke night on Saturdays for example. To beat the heat, the workday begins early and ends mid-afternoon, when it becomes very quiet on site. When not working, residents linger in community spaces, like the library and cafeteria, relax by the pool, or go for hikes in the surrounding nature preserve.

The Arcosanti project contains within its identity a number of dualities. It is compact and empty, out-of-date and at the same time full of new life, thoroughly corporate and yet relaxed and casual. The Archives department takes on the task of dealing with these dualities. Just as its works to preserve and display Soleri's writings and artworks, the Archive also seeks to understand how Arcosanti operates by documenting the evolution of the project and its growth. Through the official Arcosanti website, the Archives provides a summary, not only of the goals of the project that Soleri laid out, but also the details of Arcosanti's history and the current events on site. The website also features a log of the daily goings-on at Arcosanti, such as updates on the projects being undertaken and community events. In this way, a visitor to the website can

track the progress of construction on site, with photographs and text describing the many projects being undertaken, cultivating a transparency between the project and its public.

This archiving stands out because, while impressively meticulous, it borders on the unnecessary. Entries range from announcing the completion of important undertakings or large public events, to photos of the intermediate and uneventful progress of small projects. Keeping record of the quotidian can be seen as merely a corporate leaning toward documentation, or else the practice appears as a kind of vanity, assuming that there is an audience that is deeply invested in these small events. Yet, it seems more that because Arcosanti is a community based on construction, the archive of each activity, whether or not it be of groundbreaking progress, is a documentation of the community's growth. Within the archive is the desire to tell the story of a community created piece by piece, to narrate with care and attention the construction of the first Arcology.

The question often comes up for tour guides at Arcosanti whether or not the project is an intentional community. Soleri's response back in the 1970s, and also the response that the tour guides will give today, is that it is not. Soleri wanted to emphasize that Arcosanti is not a project turning its back on the world, in the way that other intentional distance themselves from society. And, in fact, the Arcosanti project was not a place founded by a group, in the way that other utopian communities have been founded by groups seeking to distance themselves from reality. Rather, it was the place that made the group, in the sense that it was the construction that drew people.

And yet, the history of the project, and Soleri's relationship to architecture and education, suggests that Arcosanti is most certainly not simply an accident, an unintentional community haphazardly brought together. Great care went into the assemblage of this space, where each

structure is lovingly produced by a group of dedicated individuals. While the overall form of the project and the community changes, it is the attention to construction, the intention to create, that resonates throughout.



Figure 6: Arcosanti viewed from the southeast (author's photograph)

Chapter Two: Wor(l)ds – Arcosanti and Soleri's Texts

Those that knew Paolo Soleri well say that from the moment he woke up, he was at work in his studio, sketching and writing well into the day. Soleri was a prolific author, writing and collaborating on almost twenty books that were published during his lifetime, 1919 to 2013, as well as leaving behind a number of as-of-yet unpublished works in the Arcosanti archives. Since Arcosanti's inception, Soleri's texts have played an important role in shaping the project. It was through Soleri's first published work, *The City in the Image of Man*, that Arcosanti was announced and developed alongside the concept of the Arcology.³⁶ Furthermore, Soleri's texts were used to draw attention to Arcosanti, and the Cosanti Foundation's other works, not only bringing in visitors and volunteers but also sparking a debate about architecture and urban planning.

Soleri continued to write over the following forty years at Arcosanti. In that time he developed his theories about Arcologies, the extremely compact and therefore efficient cities, and their social and environmental implications.³⁷ Soleri's books were written to persuade architects and urban planners, the builders of the cities of tomorrow, of the imperatives of rethinking how cities are built. Yet, Soleri was also an advocate of learning by doing, and of hands-on construction work, so his texts are also a call to action for the general population, that everyone may help to build these new cities.

³⁶ *The City in the Image of Man* explored in detail Soleri's Arcology concept. To this day it has remained Soleri's most famous book, and its success has been credited for precipitating an exhibit of Soleri's work at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, D.C.

³⁷ *Arcosanti: An Urban Laboratory*, 1993; *The Urban Ideal: Conversations with Paolo Soleri*, 2001; *What If? Collected Writings 1986 – 2000*, 2002; *The Mind Garden: Conversations with Paolo Soleri II*, 2007; *Conversations with Paolo Soleri*, 2012; *Lean Linear City: Arterial Arcology*, 2012.

Because Soleri envisioned Arcosanti as a physical manifestation of his theories, studying his writings is integral to understanding the ideas that the project embodies. Furthermore, following Soleri's death in 2013, these texts take on new meaning within the construction and interpretation of Arcosanti. Time may see the planning and budgets and technology on site change, and the population at Arcosanti may swell or dwindle, but Soleri's written words are fixed. His writings act as a constitution that, while open to interpretation, contains some originalist seed. Therefore, examining Soleri's employment of writing sheds light on both his process as an architect and on his process as a utopian thinker. In his absence, it is Soleri's writings that stand in for his opinion and that will continue to guide development.

What's in a name?

Growing up in Italy, Paolo Soleri was not a native English speaker, and as such his writings display a certain playful creativity with the language. The link between meaning and expression was evidently an important issue, and if Soleri thought that there wasn't an adequate word for a topic he was discussing, he would simply create a new one. For example, to emphasize the connection between equity and esthetics, and their convergence through architecture, Soleri created the word "esthequity".³⁸ It was this very notion of "esthequity" that later developed into the Omega Seed theory, the subject of much of Soleri's later writings.³⁹

Bringing together two words, as a portmanteau, proved to be an important tool for Soleri. The name of his architectural studio, Cosanti, is the portmanteau of the Italian words *cosa*, "a thing", and *anti*, "before" or "against", and therefore means something like before (or against) material things. That Soleri chose to create a portmanteau to name his studio is particularly

³⁸ Paolo Soleri, "The Promise", in *What If? Collected Writings 1986-2000*, Berkeley Hills Books, 2002. p. 188

³⁹ Paolo Soleri, *The Omega Seed: An Eschatological Hypothesis*, New York: Anchor Books. 1981

powerful because the process of compressing words together echoes the architectural aspirations of the Cosanti Foundation, which aims to compress cities together. It was a similar drive toward more efficient and precise terminology that saw the creation of the word “Arcology” in the first place. Just as Arcology conceptually joined together architecture and ecology, its name combined these two words into one. The frugality of expressing more with less through composite words is something that Soleri, who often wrote about the virtues of frugal living, must have admired.

And true to the complexity-through-miniaturization tenet of Arcology theory, the portmanteau has many layers of meaning embedded within it. Arcology, for example, is not just the coming together of “ecology” and “architecture”, but also hints at the combination of “architecture” and “logos”. Therefore, the term Arcology also asserts itself as a space of architectural discourse, and the construction of the Arcology is itself a form of discussion.

Soleri seemed to enjoy generating names for his projects, most apparently seen in the creative names he produced for the thirty Arcologies that are presented in *The City in the Image of Man*. These are playful combinations of elements describing the shape and setting of his Arcologies, for example “Arcube” and “Hexahedron”, “Arcanyon” and “Asteromo”. The names inevitably become repetitive, “Arcobabel”, “Babeldiga”, “Babelnoah”, and “Novanoah”. The biblical references in these names, “babel-” and “-noah”, are curious considering that Soleri considered himself an atheist. And yet the references are powerful considering the significance of Christianity within art history, which is something Soleri, growing up and studying art in predominantly Catholic Italy, would have understand quite well.

In the Bible, the Tower of Babel, for example, was man’s attempt at building a mega-structure as a means of achieving godliness. This is striking in the context of the Arcologies,

monolithic cities that Soleri believed would push mankind towards a higher state of evolution.⁴⁰ Perhaps Soleri saw the creation of Arcologies as a sequel to the biblical story, except that no higher power refutes the construction process in his version.

Similarly rich is the allusion to Noah and the biblical flood in naming Arcologies, many of which were even designed to float at sea. In English, as in Italian, the “arc-” embedded in many of the names of the thirty Arcologies is not just a reference to architecture, but is also reminiscent of Noah’s Ark. Therefore, the very principle of Arcology becomes linked to the boat that saved life on earth from certain destruction. Invoking the story of the Flood, which in Genesis is sent to earth to destroy a corrupt mankind, raises a few questions about corruption and salvation within the context of the Arcologies. Whether or not Soleri intended to make a call about human morality, there is certainly a sense of urgency in this reference to environmental disaster. In the face of impending global climate change, and with it rising sea levels, the Arcology truly can be seen as a vessel designed to save mankind. Against environmental catastrophe, carrying within it the seeds of a more equitable and sustainable future society. By revealing the plans for the Arcologies through the *City in the Image of Man*, Soleri places himself in the role of the deity, capable of designing humanity’s salvation.

The name Arcosanti was the last of the thirty Arcologies listed in *The City in the Image of Man*. Like its predecessors, Arcosanti is also a compound word, this time formed out of two other portmanteaux: “Arcology” and “Cosanti”. In this way, the name Arcosanti is a sort of meta-portmanteau, a folding in of all the constituent concepts of its components. This creates a term that is quite dense, an appropriate naming practice for a concept that advocates the folding and compressing of space.

⁴⁰ Paolo Soleri, “The Evolutionary Coherence Bubble”, 1999, in *Collected Writings*

The composition of the name Arcosanti presents its own questions. Arcosanti appears to be composed of the “arc-” of architecture and Arcology, and “-cosanti”, Soleri’s studio and home. Under this composition Arcosanti is directly tied to Cosanti. At Cosanti, Soleri experimented designing buildings that were integrated into the landscape and that were more suited to human proportions. With Arcosanti, Soleri proposed designing cities that did much the same thing, though on a larger scale. In Soleri’s early works, the name Arcosanti is actually interchangeable with “Macro-Cosanti”. Arcosanti was first proposed as a bridge between what Soleri had already built at his architectural studio, the “micro”, and the ambitious Arcology theory, “the macro”.⁴¹ Arcosanti as an extension of his architectural studio, becomes a vision of utopian community as an extension of the studio, focused on production and design.

But in Italian *santi* means “holy”, and therefore Arcosanti also contains the reading “holy architecture”. In line with the theological elements in the names of the other Arcologies, one might go so far as to read Arcosanti as “city of saints”. In this light, the Arcosanti project truly takes its place among the biblical stories, revising these classic stories of destruction to stress that through construction and collaboration, humans will be able to build their own utopia.

Text as a personal exploration of Utopia

Throughout the course of his life, Paolo Soleri used text to track engage with his ideas. For example, Soleri diligently kept a series of sketchbooks in which he recorded and worked through his architectural and philosophical theories. While attending the Torino Polytechnico, Soleri’s kept artists journals in which he would sketch and paint for his projects at school,⁴² and after he left Taliesin West, Soleri began regularly working in sketchbooks again. The seven

⁴¹ Paolo Soleri, *The City in the image of Man*, MIT Press, 1969

⁴² Iolanda Lima, *Soleri: La formazione giovanile 1933-1946*, 2009

sketchbooks that Soleri produced starting at the end of the 1950s, now housed in the Soleri archives at Arcosanti, each took two to three years to fill.⁴³ Therefore, these sketchbooks represent an impressive selection of Soleri's work, with almost three decades of his thoughts recorded in their pages.



Figure 7: Cover of one of Soleri's sketchbooks, in the Arcosanti Archives (author's photograph)

The books themselves, as physical objects, reveal a good deal about Soleri's relationship to writing. Soleri personally hand-crafted each sketchbook specifically for the task, showing a deep investment in the process, from assembling the book all the way through filling its pages. Each book was bound in an aluminum cover that Soleri designed and cast himself (Figure 7). He made these covers using a technique he called "earth-casting", which is a means of creating sculptures using molds that are made out of tightly compacted silt from local riverbeds.⁴⁴

⁴³ Paolo Soleri. *The Sketchbooks of Paolo Soleri*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 197

⁴⁴ Paolo Soleri and Scott M. Davis, *Paolo Soleri's Earth Casting: For Sculpture, Models and Construction*. Peregrine-Smith Press, 1984

Designs can be pressed into the moist silt, and objects formed in these molds take on an earthy quality.⁴⁵

That the aluminum covers of Soleri's sketchbooks were cast in silt places them in line with the many sculptures and crafts that Soleri produced in a similar manner. Each book an object of art in its own right, thus revealing the level of attention, and care, that Soleri gave to this platform. These were thick objects, measuring 17 by 14 inches and containing about 400 pages.⁴⁶ The metal covers would be heavy and cold in the reader's hands, and loud when placed on a table. Like the tomes of medieval Europe, these books took time to craft and have a strong presence.

Soleri wrote in these books with anything from pencils and ballpoint pens to laundry markers and wax crayons.⁴⁷ The use of different writing materials not only affects the legibility of the words, but also provides a nod at the filling-in of the sketchbooks as a process through time, Soleri leaving and coming back after an interval of time with a different implement. The writing is also slightly messy, with clustered letters and scribbled out words, words split between two lines, spelling mistakes and words with forgotten letters crammed in to the space around them. As Soleri observed in the preface of the first publication from this body of work, "the writing is not only sketchy and unrevised, it is also grammatically wanting, the spelling is as casual as a lazy Italian tongue and an undisciplined hand can coordinate."⁴⁸ There's a self-knowledge, or rather a sort of light self-deprecation in Soleri's preface. This comment speaks to

⁴⁵ Soleri used earth-casting to produce objects both large and small, ranging from the small clay bells, to the concrete panels that make up the buildings at Cosanti and Arcosanti.

⁴⁶ Paolo Soleri, *The Sketchbooks of Paolo Soleri*. MIT Press, 1971

⁴⁷ Soleri, *The Sketchbooks*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

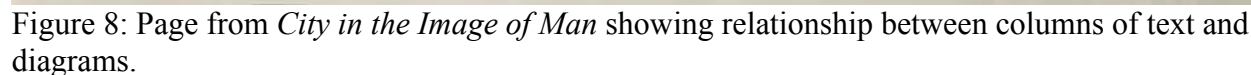
his relaxed relationship with writing in the sketchbooks, being unafraid to write quickly and make mistakes in what was his second language.

On one hand, the sketchbooks are not written for an audience, they are Soleri's personal writing. Soleri was not focusing on editing or presentation, but rather on using text as a personal meditation, stream-of-consciousness text, written in a quick and untidy manner. Looking through the sketchbooks then gives the reader access to Soleri's train of thoughts. These books became a means of generating publicity for the Arcosanti project, allowing readers to see what was behind the Arcology, looking at Soleri's early thoughts as a means for understanding Arcosanti.

Text as Mass Media

After the sketchbooks, much of Soleri's texts were written with an audience in mind. Soleri was conscious of the need for publicity inherent in his project. In order for his utopian vision to gain and momentum, Soleri needed to publish work that would draw people to his cause. His first published work, *Arcology: The City in the Image of Man*, demonstrates how Soleri used text to persuade and to entice. The text in *City in the Image of Man* was the first time the Soleri was introduced to Soleri's work, and its presentation had a great impact on the public perception of Soleri and the Arcosanti project.

At it's first publishing, the book was four feet long, and it was larger than life, filled with complex diagrams and huge, intricate illustrations that captured the reader's attention and imagination. The book itself was unwieldy, hard to open and read, and impossible to fit into any bag. These formatting choices have the combined affect of, once again, making the text into an object, an act of glorifying writing. Like the sketchbooks, the city in the image of man was another cherished tome, impressive and mysterious.



The City in the Image of Man is not something to be read at leisure but rather something to be studied closely, and daily. The text is difficult to digest, but not because it's written in a loose handwriting like in the Sketchbooks. Rather, the book is written in a sharp computer font, and the small size of the text physically draws in the reader to the page. This precision makes *The City in the Image of Man* a controlled and regulated display, filled with an almost poetically dense text, an antithesis to Soleri's previously mentioned "lazy Italian tongue". *The City in the Image of Man* has become a sort of central text to Arcosanti, a guide to Arcology theory and its applications⁴⁹; reading the text provides visitors to the site the means of understanding the mechanics of the Arcosanti project.

At some point, Soleri's writing takes a turn away from the architectural implications of the Arcology theory. For about a decade, well after construction at Arcosanti was underway, Soleri focused on producing a series of philosophical texts about subjects that do not on the surface deal with urban planning or architecture. His books *Omega Seed* (1981) and *Technology and Cosmogenesis* (1986), are the prime example of this period of writing, published as straight texts, without the presentational quirks of the sketchbooks or the *City in the Image of Man*. The writing in the philosophy texts is ontological in nature, taking on questions about the nature of existence, examine the universe through the functioning of its constituent pieces, and most importantly through their interaction and interconnectivities. Specifically, Soleri is interested in Eschatology, the branch of philosophy that speculating about ends, the progression of time and history towards the end of the universe.⁵⁰ In this way, these texts relate back to what Soleri was doing with the naming of his Arcologies, fleshing out the philosophical implications of his architectural projects.

⁴⁹ There is a book club at Arcosanti that reads through and discusses one chapter from the book each month, showing the degree to which *The City in the Image of Man* is closely read and cherished.

⁵⁰ Paolo Soleri, *The Omega Seed*.

Paolo Soleri's employment of text, and the formatting choices he made for those publications, reveals an awareness of media that places Soleri's writings in line with a long history of utopian representations. Through his writings he created an architecture of words, one that played with vocabulary and presentation. Soleri's writings became a backbone for his construction projects, connecting the world to his expanding theories, and grounding the architectural permutations of his projects within that web.



Figure 9: Outside the Colly Soleri Music Center at Arcosanti (author's photograph)

Chapter Three: Arcosanti and Soleri's Illustrated World

Paolo Soleri was trained as a visual artist and an architect, and throughout his life the drive to illustrate, to form ideas through images, has been a very important part of his work. The process of formulating and communicating his Arcology concept was therefore not confined to the written word. Many artists over the years have used illustration as a means of defining the utopian, communicating their values and inspiring awe. Likewise, Soleri used artwork to articulate his vision, and to key into the imaginations of his viewers. He produced prolific imagery of his Arcologies that to this day form an important part of the Arcosanti project identity. Soleri relied on the idea that seeing is tantamount to believing, and his large-scale drawings brought nation attention to the Arcosanti project.⁵¹

Representations of Arcosanti can be traced back through many iterations, linked both conceptually and through the forms that constitute them. Before construction began at Arcosanti, Soleri drew up plans for what he called Macro-Cosanti, which was to be an evolution of the work at Cosanti studio. Before Macro-Cosanti, Soleri produced a series of illustrations for a project called Mesa City. The early seeds of all of these projects were being worked through in Soleri's sketchbooks before. Therefore, looking at the development of visual representations of Arcosanti over time, and the different platforms and illustrational styles that Soleri employed, provides a glimpse at how the Arcosanti project has grown and changed over time,

⁵¹ The 1970 exhibition "The Visions of Paolo Soleri" at Washington D.C.'s Corcoran Gallery attracted a record-breaking number of attendees, and then traveled extensively throughout the United States and Canada. The 2005 exhibition in Rome brought similar international attention.

Sketching – creating a visual vocabulary

As investigated in Chapter One, the sketchbooks were a site of experimentation where Soleri first begins to articulate his ideas. Soleri's sketches are the sites of some of the earliest imagery connected to Arcosanti. While the books contain ample text, the better part of each page is taken up by architectural illustrations (Figure 7), depicting huge structures which can be read as early Arcologies. Through casual sketched lines, Soleri experiments with the form and setting of these cities, and plays with the details of their constituent parts, such as towers and bridges. The sketches reveal the way that his buildings have evolved, with certain architectural and shapes and themes running through the pages. These images are given space to grow and develop, and the sketchbook becomes a place to perfect, somewhat paradoxically due to its cursory execution, the translation of theory into architectural expression.

The sketch is not about precision, but rather about capturing a feeling or an essence. The images in the sketchbooks have been quickly drawn, composed of shaky lines that overlap and sometimes contradict themselves. Because the sketches are drawn in ink, mistakes can't be erased. More lines must be added to the illustrations, layering up around areas of interest that may have been re-worked, such that the idea at the heart of the illustration is found averaged between its lines. As a platform, the sketchbook is a way of thinking through images, and in the pages of his sketchbooks, Soleri developed a visual vocabulary, a bank of forms that would later serve as source material for his architectural projects.

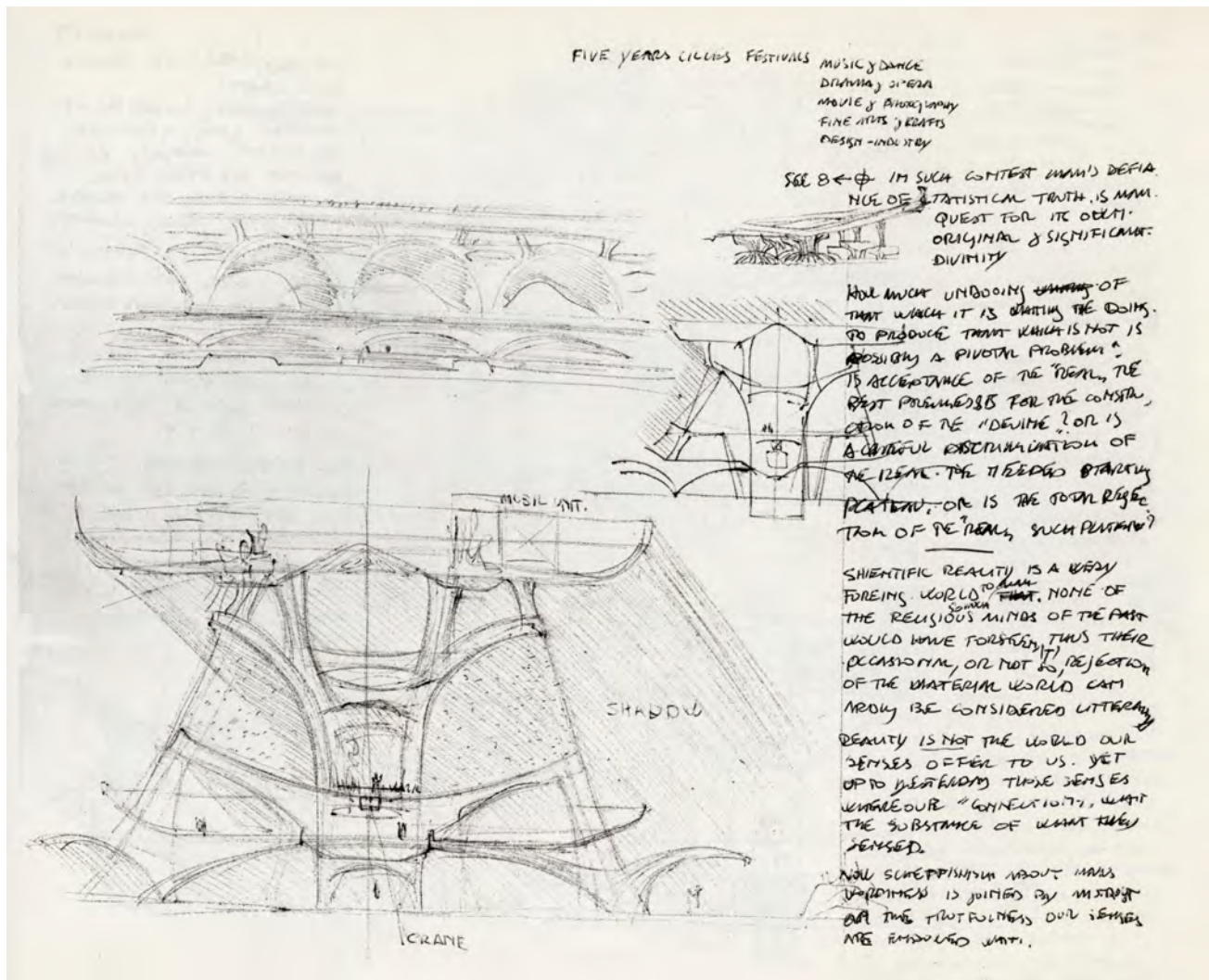


Figure 10: A page from Soleri's sketchbook, 1963.

Take for example this page (Figure 7) from one of Soleri's sketchbooks, drawn in 1963, featuring four sketches that appear to be views of the same structure. The image in the upper left shows a façade composed of a series of arches, or apses as the shading suggests. The smaller sketch to the right and the larger sketch in the lower left both show a section through this building. The larger section acts a study of how the structure interacts with sunlight. The sketches were in this way useful to Soleri as a tool with which he could develop an understanding for the architectural vision he was building. Apses, for example, appear

frequently throughout Soleri's work, from early sketches like this page to the realized structures at Arcosanti. The idea of a building made up largely of the negative space of apses, which open up to the environment, became important in later Arcology models.

Today, looking through Soleri's sketches feels like a chance to see the "raw" work, the designs that he produced before everything else. Soleri's sketches become a bank of visual material, which have served as a place of inspiration, and even justification, for many of the architectural and artistic works he produced in the years following. Small excerpts from the sketches are featured in many of Soleri's later projects, for example placed as inserts next to illustrations that feature similar content, such as in the *City in the Image of Man*. The sketches are even sometimes simply placed on title pages and above chapter headings as decorative objects. This practice reveals an attempt to establish a cannon of Soleri's work, and to carefully document the origins of each design. In the sketchbooks, then, illustrations become small objects that the viewer could collect and hold on to as a means of understanding Arcology.

At the same time as he was working in the sketchbooks, Soleri was also producing a series of huge, lively illustrations drawn on huge scrolls of paper. Unlike the sketches, these illustrations are full of rich colors and details, designed to be shown, to enchant and overwhelm the viewer.

The scrolls are made on butcher paper, which Soleri used because it was inexpensive. He made his illustrations in wax crayon and charcoal, materials that create layers and textures on the page. On one hand, the materiality of these works makes them feel informal, almost like a child's drawing. Yet the sheer size of these illustrations, the largest one hundred eighty feet long, is inspiring and even overwhelming.⁵² Interacting with these massive objects presents an interesting set of challenges for the viewer. To unroll completely requires a large space, as in a gallery, such

⁵² Cosanti Foundation, "Paolo Soleri Archives", <<https://arcosanti.org/node/25>>

that unrolling a scroll becomes a formal occasion. Yet, even in this space, the viewer has to stand significantly far back to be able to see the entire image at once, thereby lessening the amount of detail that can be seen. When being viewed in a smaller space, the viewer can get close enough to appreciate the details. Yet, in smaller rooms, the scroll can never be unrolled completely (Figure 8). Only fragments of the entire scroll may be seen at any one time, as it rolls by. In this way, the subject matter is never fully graspable by its viewers, just as a sweeping panorama can be admired but not taken in at once.



Figure 11: “Arts & Crafts Village” scroll being unrolled in the Arcosanti Archives (Author’s Photograph).

Most of the scrolls that Soleri made depict parts of a project called Mesa City, which was a proto-Arcology, a large city that sat on a mesa top designed to run on renewable energy harvested from the surrounding environment, which Soleri called “cosmic potentials”. Conceptually, many of the components of the Mesa City scroll series linked to Arcosanti, such as the way the city interacted with the landscape. Because these illustrations depict a world that Soleri envisioned before refining his plan for Arcosanti, they contain the wild and fantastical, the possibility of what could have been built.

Take for example, the illustration titled “Arts & Crafts Village” (Figure 12), depicting an architectural complex rising out of a rocky outcropping. The buildings are made up of a series of platforms and domes, resting on pillars, which make up an almost skeletal image, as if the structure is a fossil being excavated from the mountainside. But there is also a crystalline element to the buildings. That a crystal is both as hard as the rocks in which it is formed and yet ethereal, light being able to refract through it, is a fitting image in Soleri’s projects, which rise from the rock to gather cosmic energy. The Arts & Crafts Village is reminiscent of German architect Bruno Taut’s “Alpine Architecture” illustrations of 1917, which also depict utopian cities made out of crystal, perching on top of jagged mountains.⁵³ Soleri’s work transposes this imagery from the mountains of Europe to the desert of Arizona. The work of artists like Taut reinforces the utopian aspects of Soleri’s illustrations, placing his work within the context of other artist who envisioned utopic cities, and therefore allowing those visions to resonate through Soleri’s work as well.

⁵³ Taut, Bruno. *Alpine architecture*. Ed. Dennis Sharp. New York: Praeger. 1972



Figure 12: "Arts & Crafts Village", 1961.
 Fragment of a drawing from the Mesa City scroll series.

A second important image from the Mesa City Scroll series is a fragment known as the “Macro Cosanti Tower”, completed in 1964 (Figure 13). This illustration was created using wax crayons and Colored pencil on gauze-backed paper. It depicts a large tower, made up of two segments stacked on top of each other. The silhouette of this building looks like a tiered fountain, or a plant unfurling its leaves. The form has a strong organic element to it, as if the city had sprouted out of the land upon which it stands. The tiered levels also resemble boats with long smooth hulls and a line of round windows along the side adding to the nautical effect, as if a ship had wrecked on a mountaintop, a parallel with the story of the Ark.

On top of these tiers rest other buildings, domes and arcades, as well as trees. The structure is thus a series of landscapes stacked on top of each other. The tower is surmounted by a dome, or rather four apses facing the cardinal directions, which as a unity become a sort of imploded dome. The insides of these apses are decorated with a pattern that resembles the night sky. This, in effect, transforms the tower into a sort of observatory, bringing the earthly and the cosmic together.



Figure 13: “Macro Cosanti Tower”, 1964. Presented in the 1970 Corcoran Gallery Exhibit.

Inside the imploded dome at the top of the image, a collection of little red figures is visible. Soleri often used red in his drawings to represent people, standing out from their background, as if being seen through infrared scopes. These figures are slightly blurry, almost ghostly, as if they can only suggest the presence of people but cannot assure it. These characters are depicted in some kind of community meeting, gathered in the observatory at the top of the tower, much as to this day Arcosanti residents gather for community meetings daily.

Yet, the presence of inhabitants raises the question of how these people come and go from their tower, with no visible door at its base. Furthermore, the image is presented in a void of white, meaning that the city and its inhabitants are isolated from the outside world. The Macro-Cosanti Tower is depicted like a fortress, as are many of Soleri's projects. The hypothetical inhabitants of this structure cloister themselves away from the world. Along these lines it is possible to see Arcology, the vision of compressed, monolithic cities perched in strategic locations, as a feudal castle, exercising power over the surrounding territory. Yet among the intended goals of Arcology theory was to promote interaction between a building and its environment, between people and nature. Therefore, a curious dynamic arises between perceptions of democracy and land usage in Soleri's work. The Arcology, a vision of equality through compression, is pitted against visions of democracy as spread, like Wright's Broadacre city.

As a platform, the scrolls are becoming increasingly delicate as they age. They are kept at controlled temperature and humidity in the archives of Arcosanti, where the viewer must don white gloves to handle them, and only in low lighting. Unrolling the scroll to see the illustrations contained within then becomes a sort ceremony. Whether in a formal gallery setting or in an intimate archive, seeing the scrolls is a rare chance at glimpsing inside of Soleri's imagination

and vision for his projects. Therefore, before the illustrations are even seen, the viewer is humbled by the viewing process, and filled with anticipation and inspiration.

Architectural Views

Up until the publishing of the *City in the Image of Man*, none of the illustrations that Soleri produced actually bore the name Arcosanti. The first true image of Arcosanti was revealed, after thirty sample Arcologies, through a series of elevations and blueprints at the end of *The City in the Image of Man*. The illustrations in this body of work are made to look more technical than the scrolls, and certainly more refined than the sketches. The lines are sharp and thin, and there is no color. The printed images are large enough to contain impressive details, but small enough to be reproducible, meaning that more so than the other media Soleri produced used, these images were able to be distributed amongst and consumed by the population. Within the Arcosanti story, this was one of the most important platforms for the presentation of imagery, because it garnered a great deal of attention for the project. These illustrations give the appearance of exactness, that they contain some architectural truth because they are made to look like blueprints. What's more, the pages with these illustrations are very full, each featuring three or four images, sometimes layered over each other. This presentation delivers an abundance of visual information, certainly impressing if not overwhelming the viewer.

One of the most interesting pages from the series of Arcosanti images in *The City in the Image of Man* features a number of views of the structure (Figure 14). Firstly, an image taken from one of Soleri's sketchbooks that resembles the central apse of Arcosanti is in the lower left, as if introducing all the other imagery on the page. Similarly, in the lower right is a section through Arcosanti that greatly resembles the sketch examined earlier in this chapter (Figure 10). These two images create a pathway from Soleri's sketches to connect to this body of work, and hinting that the work can continue to be developed in the future.

The majority of the page is taken up by a large isometric drawing of the Arcology, with a partial cutaway view to the foundation of the structure. Unlike an elevation or blueprint, isometric views give the illustration the appearance of existing in three dimensions, as if the viewer is floating just above the work. In this image, Arcosanti is a large rectangular structure, nestled into the side of a cliff. There is a balance between detail and empty space. The horizontal surfaces—roofs and floors—are left relatively empty, while the walls have a great amount of detail. The space within the apse receives the most detail, which attention to the apses, an important component of the structure.

As with the illustrations in the scrolls, the Arcology in this drawing is seen floating, for the most part, in isolation. Few of the images in *The City in the Image of Man* go beyond a general suggestion that Arcosanti is situated by rock, but whether it's built upon solid rock or rubble, or upon a mesa or down in a valley is not clear in these illustrations. Considering that, ultimately, Arcosanti was the only Arcology to gain a real location, this lack of specificity is a bit ironic. However, the isometric drawing pictured above does notably include one element of the Arcology's surroundings. Illustrated at the very center of the page is a drawing, to scale, of the buildings of Soleri's architectural studio outside of phoenix, Cosanti.

This is perhaps the most interesting aspect of the plan because it plays with the connection between Cosanti and Arcosanti. On one hand, the inclusion of the Cosanti site in the image might simply be as a reference point for the scale of the Arcosanti project, a comparison between what Soleri wants to construct with the projects that he and his coworkers had already undertaken. But perhaps Soleri actually intend at one point to build Arcosanti on the same tract of land as his studio, directly incorporating the existing structures rather than leaving them behind. In the case of the latter, the evolution of Soleri's term Macro-Cosanti becomes clearer.

As a medium, the architectural plan distinguishes itself from the sketches and scrolls because it presents utopian visions as very real possibility. Its clean lines give the impression that one need only give the plans to a contractor and the Arcology will be built. Because *The City in the Image of Man* was a platform that tried to raise awareness and garner support for Arcosanti and Arcologies in general, it makes sense, that these illustrations try to promote the Arcology as a feasible architectural project. Yet, as Soleri notes in the book's preface, "The graphics are not meant to be taken literally."⁵⁴ The illustrations are impressive, and to an extent seductive, but there is something deceptive about them as well. The image of Arcosanti is not meant to be used as a blueprint, but is nonetheless supposed to provide a vision around which people can gather.

The illustrations in the *City in the Image of Man* are the most well known, and widely circulated, images related to Arcosanti and Soleri's Arcology theory. Yet this body of work marks an important transition in the representations of Arcosanti, as Soleri did not execute the architectural illustrations himself. Rather, a group of interns studying at the Cosanti Foundation produced these images under Soleri's direction. This model of architectural apprenticeship actually echoes Soleri's time at Taliesin West, working with Frank Lloyd Wright. Soleri

⁵⁴ Soleri, *City in the Image of Man*, 1969

therefore was recreating the conditions under which he learned from Wright, this time placing himself as the charismatic central figure in charge of the process.

Furthermore, in overseeing the reproduction and refinement of imagery relating to the Arcology, Soleri laid the foundations for a new group of individuals to take over where he left off. This is particularly important because just as Soleri was supervising the production of illustrations, he was preparing to begin construction at Arcosanti, a project that would involve hundreds of people and continue after his death. The workshop program that at first produced imagery of Arcosanti transitioned to see the apprentices begin to build those spaces. Soleri remained in charge of architectural planning and design at Arcosanti for the remainder of his life, and under his direction Arcosanti took on a life of its own.

Since his death, the community has continued to produce work in the framework that he left behind. Within the Arcosanti project, then, the illustrations that Soleri left behind serve as an inspirational guide in two important ways. First, the forms themselves are important as they create reference points, opening windows through which Soleri's imagination can be accessed. Second, emphasized in each of these works is that the process of visual representation is a hands-on process. Soleri's sketches, scrolls, and architectural renderings in this way began to build his utopia before construction ever began, and enticed others into the process.



Figure 15: Paolo Soleri in the Ceramics studio at Cosanti in the 1970s.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Stewart Weiner, via the cosanti foundation.

Conclusion: Understanding Arcosanti in the Popular Imagination

Buckminster Fuller, upon visiting Cosanti, once warned Soleri that “such colossal visions are not going to be easily interpreted by the public.”⁵⁶ There is a web of representation that surrounds Arcosanti, and in the thick of it arises a number of problems of representation. Arcosanti first and foremost took form in the space in Soleri’s imagination, which he explored through text and illustration. And yet, the utopian space communicated through writing is different than that conveyed through illustration. Complicating matters, at some point Arcosanti left the Soleri’s mind and began to take form in the real world. At this point it became not just a theorized place, but also something new, open to the interpretation of the many that interacted with it.

With all representations of Arcosanti there must be an awareness of the public, and an awareness media. Take for example how Arcosanti choses to represent itself through social media platforms like Instagram and Facebook. Through these platforms the public receives glimpses of Arcosanti that the project’s media coordinator has specifically chosen to paint a controlled image of Arcosanti (Figure 16). The company’s Instagram, for example, has three thousand followers, and has made over three hundred posts in the few years since it started.⁵⁷ These images, taken by Arcosanti residents and are then curated by the administration, show the most attractive angles of the site, and by extension, suggest what it might feel like to live there. The Instagram mostly showcases Arcosanti’s interesting architectural details, or shows the residents busy at work making art or pouring cement, or lounging by the pool. Following Arcosanti through Instagram therefore delivers succinct images of honest work, art, and leisure,

⁵⁶ Soleri thinks very big” in *New York Times*, July 26, 1970.

⁵⁷ “Arcosanti Arizona”, on Instagram

things so often envied of others on social sites. The comments section on each picture allows the public to react to the images, and to demonstrate interest, or familiarity, with the project.

Arcosanti's Facebook likewise advertises concerts and other cultural shows, ensuring that the project is seen as a place of art and culture.

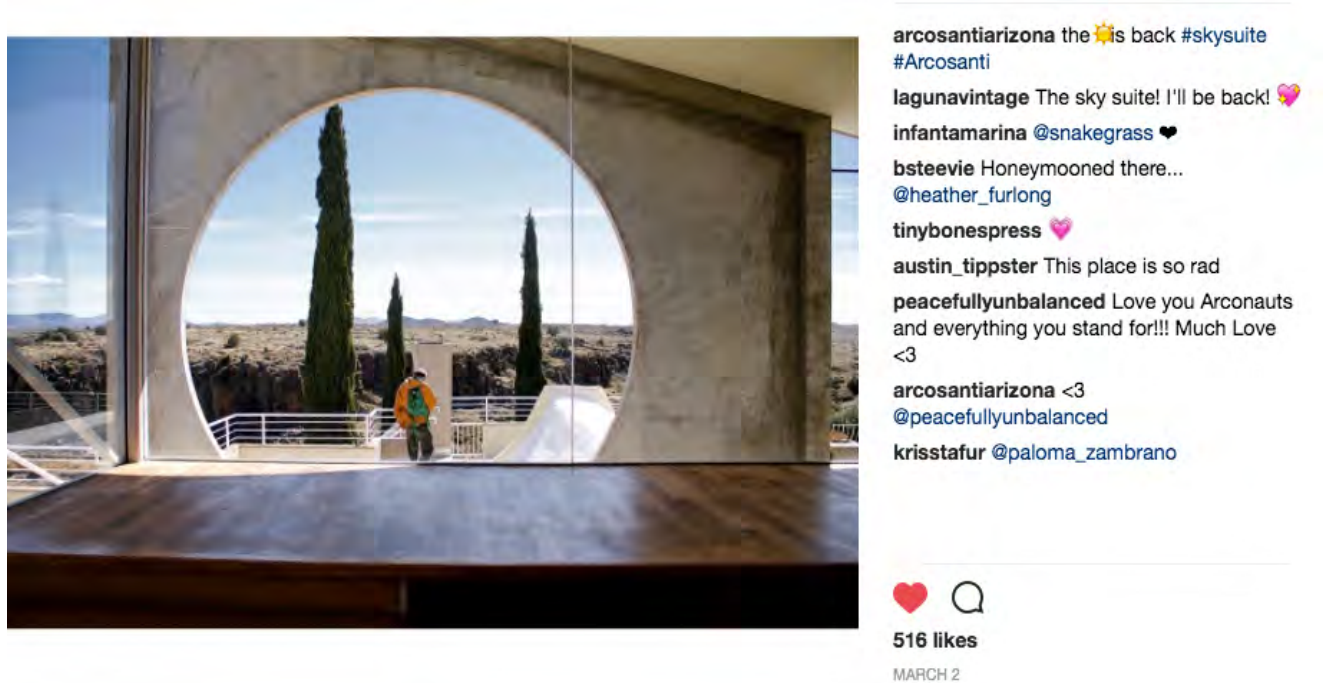


Figure 16: Image from Arcosanti's Instagram account (@arcosantiarizona), showing a view from the "sky suite", which can be rented on weekends.

Through social media platforms, life at Arcosanti looks beautiful and exciting, which it certainly is. And yet, as with all social media, these views are mostly superficial. Representations over these platforms reduce how much information is actually being gained about the place. Images are cropped, tweets are short, and Facebook mostly advertises to only a certain crowd of concertgoers. Social media, then, allows Arcosanti to increase the amount of information that it

puts into the world, and yet paradoxically does not increase knowledge about the values of Arcology at the project's very core.

There is an element of branding that goes into this self-representation, reflecting not necessarily how the administration views Arcosanti, but rather how they want it to be viewed. Inherent in self-representation, then, is an awareness of audience. Through social media the Arcosanti administration has chosen to present itself as an image of art, beauty, excitement and relaxation, but does not delve deeply into urban planning and ecology, the matters that are most connected to its mission. This "passive and beautiful" face of the project reflects a desire to attract a wide range of visitors with peaceful and positive images, although it compromises on the passion required of the proposed tasks.

By nature of having an official set of images and text, as produced or curated by the Cosanti Foundation, anything that is not directly produced by Cosanti becomes slightly removed from the project. The degree to which an author's representation of Arcosanti becomes distanced from the "official" narratives has to do with how different experiences of Arcosanti are weighed. Varying degrees of expertise and involvement has created a web of representations ranked on connections within the project. Descriptions of the Arcosanti project coming from members of the Arcosanti administration are the most respected and distributed, and next come the opinions of members who have been involved in Arcosanti the longest. Yet, the voices of the other Arcosanti residents are often lost, sometimes even to descriptions coming from outside the project. Despite these Arconauts having chosen to dedicate their time and skill to the project, they may be younger or newer to the project and therefore have little authority in the project's development and representation.

Questions of authorship are fresh at Arcosanti today, creating a certain tension on site. There are many different reasons that residents decide to live at Arcosanti, and for each individual the project means something slightly different. Some come because they are interested in Soleri's theories of urban planning. Some are interested in agriculture and sustainability, which are in actuality not high priority goals of the project. Still others go are attracted to the manual labor and the southwest. And yet these residents do not hold much power in how Arcosanti invests its resources and efforts. Currently at Arcosanti there is much discussion, with considerable pushback from the administration, on whether Arcosanti should become a multi-stake-holder cooperative, as a means of distributing power, and voice, among those who have invested their time into the project.

On top of what is produced by those who have a stake in what Arcosanti does and how it is represented, authors that are not directly connected to the site also produce a wealth of information about Arcosanti. Newspapers and magazines have been fascinated with the story of Arcosanti since the project's start. It is perhaps the images and texts distributed through these media, being more widely consumed than Soleri's original texts, that have shaped the public's perception of Arcosanti the most. Throughout the years of Arcosanti's representation, what has been the most memorable aspect of Arcosanti to the newcomer on site are the fantastical impressions that the architectural forms impart with them. Articles written by visitors emphasize the bizarre and otherworldly buildings, somehow timeless, somehow un-human.

For example, a local Arizona paper wrote in 1970 that "Nearby straight communities... are beginning to get edgy about things like population density at the Soleri settlement".⁵⁸ Indeed, from the start of Arcosanti, newspapers were drawing attention to the other-ness of Soleri and his

⁵⁸ Richard Register, "What are we, Men or Frogs?: Scottsdale arcologist has a solution to our strangling 'tortilla' cities", in *The Arizona Republic*, Phoenix. Friday, February 27th, 1970

projects. Arcosanti was made out to be an amazing, if not absurd, place in news sources both local and countrywide, like the *New York Times*. Readers savored the imagery that headlines created to describe Arcosanti, whether it was a “futuristic desert community”⁵⁹ or a “semi-finished, semi-ruined spaces of the hive-like community”.⁶⁰ And Soleri was the ringleader. Described in 1976 as a “controversial architect”,⁶¹ by the 2000s Soleri was the “Woodstock-era guru of alternative architecture”⁶² and a “cult figure of architecture’s freaky fringe”.⁶³ Representations of Arcosanti by outsiders have keyed into and dramatized the fantastical elements of the project since the project’s inception. And it is these depictions in newspapers like the *New York Times* that circulated most widely, especially at the start of the project when the Internet was not nearly as developed as it is today.

The otherworldly aspects of Arcosanti are further emphasized by the role that photography has played in the site’s representation. Ever since the first photos, grainy and mysterious, of construction on site, Arcosanti has been a site of wonder to photograph. Unlike Soleri’s illustrations, which require a familiarity with his philosophy, photographs capture a slice of what the site looks like at any actual given moment, free for the viewer to interpret as they see fit. Of course, there is a level of abstraction that comes with photography too, as any single photo can’t truly capture the lived experience of the site. Photos from far away for example, allow for the entire site to be glimpsed, but erase intricate details. It is these photos that often appear with articles about the project, such that the entire project can be seen, but not truly known. Photos from up close, however, narrow in on the details, single architectural elements like windows or staircases. The close attention to the site afforded by these images create an intimacy with the

⁵⁹ Ralph Blumenthal, “Futuristic Visions in the Desert”, in *The New York Times*, February 1, 1987

⁶⁰ Alastair Gordon, “Deep in the desert, no longer far out”, in *The New York Times*, July 26, 2001.

⁶¹ Robert J. Dunphy, “A Dream City Rises in the Desert”, in *The New York Times*, August 29, 1976.

⁶² Gordon, “Deep in the desert”

⁶³ *Ibid.*

space, but say nothing about the project as a whole, and tend to place emphasis on the architectural and artistic quirks rather than the rationality of the architectural and ecological concerns that went into the project's design.

Arcosanti has hosted numerous photo shoots throughout the years that rely on these bizarre details. GQ featured Arcosanti multiple times, both in its travel and fashion sections.⁶⁴ *The Wall Street Journal* even recently featured a photo shoot on site, in an article titled “The Dying Dream of Arcosanti, a Futurist’s Utopian Fantasy” (Figure 17).⁶⁵ Even Gucci staged a fashion shoot among the structures of Arcosanti in the summer of 2016.⁶⁶ It is appealing to think that the site’s architecture proved inspirational as a backdrop for audiences that are so focused on aesthetics, like GQ and Gucci. It is telling of the state of the project, however, that the *Wall Street Journal* chose to focus on the appearance of Arcosanti rather than the potential implications of the project’s philosophy. Arcosanti for the time being remains an object of daydreams and wild imagination more so than a place capable of pushing important architectural and ecological conversations. Even the title of the article in the *Wall Street Journal* suggests that Arcosanti is merely a thing of fantasy, or of the past. Is Arcosanti really a “dying dream”, just a “futurist’s utopian fantasy” as the article suggests?

⁶⁴ Alice Gregory, “Behold Arcosanti, the Astounding City of the Sands”, 2015. and David Bazner, “RTH Shop Captures Creativity and Connection in Arcosanti”, 2014

⁶⁵ David Searcy, “The Dying Dream of Arcosanti, a Futurist’s Utopian Fantasy”, in *Wall Street Journal*, October 20, 2016.

⁶⁶ Author’s correspondence with Kehui Feng

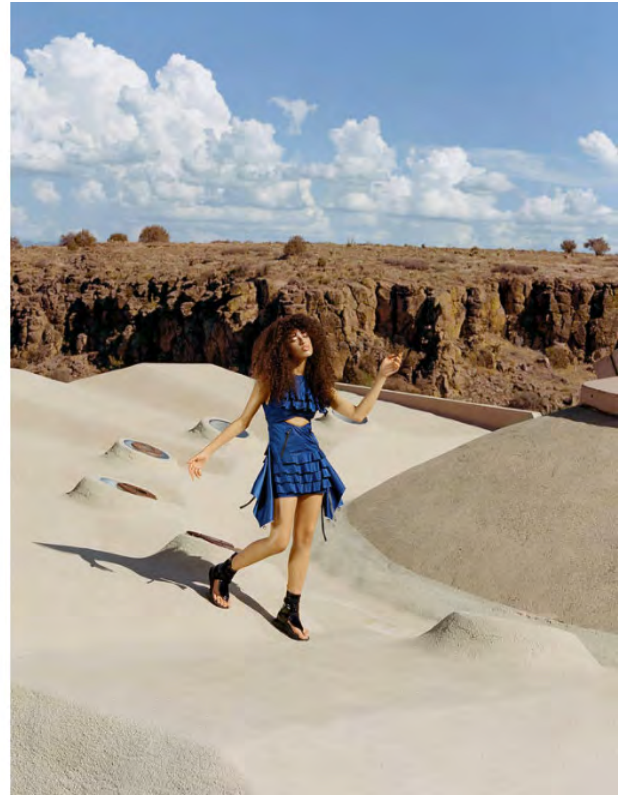


Figure 17: Photos shot by SYCHRODOGS for the “The Dying Dream of Arcosanti, a Futurist’s Utopian Fantasy”, in the *Wall Street Journal*.⁶⁷

In the public imagination, then, Arcosanti slips into utopic and even phantasmagoric representations. Arcosanti cannot seem to dispel this element of the fantastical. The Cosanti foundation, however, wants to attract newcomers and convince the public that Arcology is not only a solution to the problems of modern society and also a feasible reality. In this way the Cosanti foundation must fight against the image of Arcosanti as the Other; Arcosanti must appear to be reasonable and achievable. In order for the Arcology concept to have a noticeable affect on the environmental issues of today, as many people must join the project as possible. So the administration must seek to normalize and sell its image. But, representations of Arcosanti in popular media are far-reaching, so although these different visions do not align, at some point the

⁶⁷ SYNCHRODOGS, for *Wall Street Journal*.

project has to come to terms with its perception in the popular imagination. The image of Arcosanti as a dreamscape sets the project apart and draws attention, becoming a sort of branding for the project. Arcosanti must therefore play into the image of the fantastical even as it wishes to dispel the notion that it is utopian. The project, then, is stuck somewhere between its representations, of the bizarre and the rational.

I can't help but think back to a conversation I had at Arcosanti with Chloé Feng, a fellow work shopper. Feng came to Arcosanti from China because she had become interested in Paolo Soleri, but found a lack of available information about Arcosanti in China. Chloe was inspired by the potential benefits that Soleri's Arcology concept could have in modern Chinese urban planning. What was most exciting to her was that the construction of entire cities in a matter of years was not unheard of in China. She told me that businessmen in China could easily fund the building of an Arcology, if they wanted to. There just wasn't any information about Arcologies and the work being done at Arcosanti available in China.⁶⁸ Feng dreamt of making a documentary about Arcosanti, to draw attention to the project in China. In this way, Arcosanti's documentation could have extreme and tangible consequences for the project and for Soleri's work.

So where does the project go next? The explicit goal of the Cosanti Foundation is and always had been to see the construction of the Arcology through to the end. Arcosanti is not a finished model of Soleri's city of the future, and in this way it is an incomplete space, operating in the shadows of his vision. And yet, the community as it stands today is a very real space. So while the project draws strength from the written and visual works that Soleri authored, the actual constructed entity must be considered in its own right. Aside from the utopian visions

⁶⁸ Author's conversation with Kehui Feng.

communicated through Soleri's writing and illustrations, the site itself becomes a third space for articulating the Utopian.

Arcosanti both demands and defies representation. While I lived at Arcosanti, I tried to paint an image of the site in the minds of my friends and family, tried to define for them what exactly the project was, and how it felt to be there. Yet also I knew that my time at Arcosanti was very much my own, and communicating these experiences would not be wholly possible. The philosophy behind the "experiential learning" workshop rings true, then, that realizing the Arcology requires active participation.

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